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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

18 July 1983

CAMEROON: Biya's Political Prospects

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Summary

Cameroon has been one of Africa's most politically stable and economically prosperous countries, but its rulers must constantly wrestle with underlying challenges to its unity: over 200 tribes, 24 languages, religious differences between northern Muslims and southern Christians, and longstanding antagonisms between English-speaking West Cameroon and French-speaking East Cameroon. Ahamdou Ahidjo's sudden decision last November to retire because of ill health after 22 years as president was followed by the remarkably smooth accession to the presidency of then Prime Minister Paul Biya--Ahidjo's personally chosen successor. In recent months, however, strains have increased between the strongwilled former president--a Muslim Fulani from the north--and Biya, a French-speaking Christian from the south, and raised concern about the country's future stability.

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We believe political maneuvering and infighting will continue and intensify as long as Biya and Ahidjo attempt to share power, but we do not believe Cameroon's hard won unity is fundamentally threatened over the near term. In our judgment, Biya will continue to assert his presidential prerogatives as Ahidjo's influence wanes, and we believe he is well placed to be elected president in his own right when elections are held in 1985. Biya, in striving to assert his political independence, and Ahidjo, trying to protect northern interests,

This memorandum was prepared by [] West Africa Branch, Africa Division, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. It has been coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Africa Division []

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probably will attempt to keep their differences within manageable bounds and to avoid an irreparable split. In our judgment, however, Biya's political future depends on his ability to put his imprint on government, party, and military institutions and we believe he would have little choice but to respond forcefully should Ahidjo openly challenge his authority. []

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The Ahidjo Legacy

Cameroon's modern political history and institutions reflect the impact of Ahidjo's iron fisted rule. After Ahidjo--with French aid--crushed a seven-year long Communist-backed southern insurrection in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he concentrated on forging national unity, building a strong central government, curbing opposition, and pursuing moderate but steady economic growth. Ahidjo governed by carefully balancing ethnic and regional interests while relying on loyal fellow Muslim Fulani tribesmen from northern Cameroon to staff key government, military, and party positions. []

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It is unclear how much attention the secretive and autocratic Ahidjo gave to planning the post-Ahidjo era or grooming a political heir. A constitutional amendment in 1979 confirmed the prime minister as legal successor, but Prime Minister Biya's position then rested on his reputation as an able, intelligent, and honest administrator rather than on his political acumen or power. Moreover, Biya--a French-speaking Christian from the relatively small southern Boulou tribe--was distrusted by Ahidjo's coterie of northern advisers upset over the prospect of a southern president. []

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In our judgment, Ahidjo's wholehearted support for Biya early in the transition provided the new president with a much needed opportunity to firm up his credentials as Ahidjo's legitimate successor. Ahidjo's apparently reluctant agreement to stay on as head of the Cameroonian National Union with Biya serving as party vice president also strengthened Biya's position within the ruling party. In addition, Ahidjo's willingness to discipline northern politicians--including close and powerful confidants--spared Biya an early test of his authority against powerful northern interests. In return, Biya carefully avoided moving too quickly to replace Ahidjo loyalists. The appointment of Maigari Bello Bouba as prime minister and the elevation of longtime Ahidjo confidant Sadou Daoudou to secretary general of the presidency reportedly did much to calm initial northern fears. []

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The Biya Presidency

In our view, Biya is now confident enough after seven months in office to begin the difficult but inevitable task of moving out from under Ahidjo's political shadow. [REDACTED]

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Biya has been increasingly forceful in asserting his presidential prerogatives and making decisions without consulting Ahidjo. Last month's cabinet reshuffle--the third since Biya assumed power--replaced six ministers, including Sadou Daoudou and two others with close ties to Ahidjo. Biya has now replaced over half the cabinet he inherited and is following through on his promise to bring younger technocrats into government. Thus far, in our judgment, Biya has successfully moved out many members of the old guard without radically upsetting the delicate ethnic and regional balance crafted by Ahidjo. [REDACTED]

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At the same time, Biya has concentrated on building public support for his government. We believe Biya is trying to circumvent the party hierarchy where he lacks absolute control by appealing more directly than Ahidjo ever did to the Cameroonian people. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Biya's open and personable political style--along with his increased public visibility and calls for moderate reform, an end to corruption, and a renewal of national spirit--have dramatically increased his public popularity. In recent months, he has honed his political skills by making tours of Cameroon's seven provinces, hosting a visit by French President Mitterrand, convening a new National Assembly, and playing a well publicized role at the Addis Ababa OAU summit. [REDACTED]

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Ahidjo--Irritant or Threat?

In our view, Biya's growing independence and popularity have provoked a political backlash from Ahidjo, who is having difficulty adjusting to his diminished role outside the political limelight. Ahidjo reportedly has been attempting behind the scenes to reclaim at least some of the powers he ceded last November, and has criticized Biya for making changes too quickly and undercutting northern interests. For example, Ahidjo reportedly attempted to push through a constitutional amendment behind Biya's back designed to increase the powers of the prime minister and head of the party at the expense of the president. In addition, he is said to have called for those northern ministers, who were not sacked in the June reshuffle to resign in protest. Although some ministers reportedly were set to quit, the protest collapsed when some refused, and all currently remain in the cabinet. [REDACTED]

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The Military Factor

As in most African countries, the Army in Cameroon holds the key to the country's stability. If recurrent tugs and pulls between Ahidjo and Biya were to evolve into an intensified and prolonged power struggle between northern and southern interests, political strains could easily divide the Army and bring it into the fray. Thus far, however, the 6,500-man Army and the 4,000-man paramilitary Gendarmerie appear content to remain on the political sidelines. [redacted] no evidence of active coup plotting or that military frustrations go much beyond endemic grumbling over pay, promotions, and general service conditions. [redacted]

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Cameroon's Army is more professionally oriented than most in Africa and traditionally has refrained from open political meddling. Furthermore, although we do not know the precise ethnic makeup, there is little evidence to suggest serious tribal imbalances that often provoke coup attempts in other African armed forces. Ahidjo--who mistrusted the military--kept close control of the military by shuffling officers, retaining French advisers in important units, preventing the formation of a central command structure, and placing trusted northern civilians--such as the current Minister of Defense Abdoulaye Maikano--in charge of the armed forces. [redacted]

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In our judgment, Biya will step up judicious efforts to bring the military under his control by juggling military appointments and commands and replacing key civilians in the defense establishment. Biya already has begun making sweeping changes in the security apparatus charged with protecting the president by replacing northerners with southerners from his and related tribes. While such moves, in our judgment, are necessary to ensure Biya's control over the armed forces, we believe they run the risk of upsetting powerful entrenched interests in the military and altering traditional patterns of authority established by the conservative Ahidjo. [redacted]

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Interested Outside Parties

We believe President Biya will keep Cameroon firmly in the moderate, pro-western camp and continue Ahidjo's policy of carefully avoiding foreign entanglements. Furthermore, in our view, France--Cameroon's traditional benefactor, major trading partner, and guarantor of military security--sees Cameroon as a key moderate state in equatorial Africa and is strongly committed to backing President Biya. Although Cameroonian-French ties were strengthened by Mitterrand's recent visit, we believe Biya recognizes that becoming too closely identified with French interests

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and policies could raise apprehension among Cameroon's English-speaking population. As a consequence, we anticipate that he will pursue closer relations with Washington as a balance to Paris's influence. []

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Libya and the Soviet Union have been able to make few inroads in Cameroon. Both Ahidjo and Biya mistrust Libyan intentions in Africa and are attentive to the potential for Libyan meddling in Cameroon's largely Muslim north. The prospect of a Libyan-dominated government in Chad has increased these apprehensions and we believe Biya will continue to steer clear of Libyan overtures to improve relations, while keeping a watchful eye on Libyan subversive activities. Little has come, for example, from a Libyan initiative last December to improve relations with Cameroon by upgrading the Libyan Mission in Yaounde and renewing cultural programs and economic activities. Soviet interest and involvement in Cameroon remains low and does not appear to have increased since Biya assumed office. Cameroonians harbor memories of Soviet support for insurgents during the 1950s and 1960s, and have shown little interest in pursuing strengthened relations with Moscow. []

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Biya's Outlook

Having cut the ties between himself and Ahidjo, Biya will now be forced to rely on his own political skills rather than on Ahidjo's support to stay in power. In our view, Biya has gained the political upperhand in recent months and we believe he is in a good position to emerge as a powerful and independent president. We anticipate that he will press his recent advantages by making further changes in key government, party, and military posts. In particular, we believe that Biya is likely to turn his attention to gaining control of the party machinery before presidential elections in 1985. Biya's style thus far suggests that he will attempt to mend fences with Ahidjo whenever possible, but we do not believe he can afford to back down or defer to Ahidjo if a major confrontation between the two develops. Under such circumstances, we believe Biya would be compelled to move Ahidjo even further into the political background, and even could attempt to force him from his party position. []

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In our judgment, Ahidjo will remain an irritant to Biya as long as he maintains his formal role as party leader, but we do not believe he is in a strong enough position to force Biya's resignation or push him from office. Moreover, we believe Ahidjo's future moves could be limited by his uncertain health, []

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[] Ultimately, we believe Ahidjo, who devoted much of his life to promoting national integration, will hesitate before deliberately attempting to undermine stability. []

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Looking ahead, we believe that the current strains between Ahidjo and Biya could become entwined with other challenges to Biya's leadership.

Despite Biya's early successes and firm leadership, we anticipate that he could become more politically vulnerable as he attempts further to solidify his power. In particular, we believe ethnic and regional tensions could intensify as the traditional balance of power and method of distributing political spoils are altered:

- In our view, northerners increasingly will look to new leaders to represent their interests in the post-Ahidjo era. Although a consensus around a new leader has yet to emerge, we believe current Prime Minister Maigari Bello Bouba--a 36-year old northerner from Ahidjo's home region--is a logical successor. Thus far, Maigari has not challenged Biya or declared his political intentions, but we believe his position as the highest ranking northerner in the government provides him with a potentially powerful political base if northerners become increasingly dissatisfied with Biya's presidency.
- Despite Biya's adept juggling of ethnic, regional, and linguistic interests, we believe southerners could become upset that more spoils are not coming their way now that a southerner is president. After 22 years of what many southern groups perceived to be northern domination, we believe southern expectations are likely to outstrip Biya's ability to deliver. As a consequence, we believe Biya could come under increasing pressure to alter the traditional north-south balance in favor of the south.
- Although Cameroon has one of Africa's more prosperous and well managed economies, we believe the blame for any prolonged economic downturn--even if caused by factors beyond Biya's control--would be laid at Biya's doorstep. Under such circumstances, we anticipate that Biya's performance would be unfavorably compared to Ahidjo's. At the same time, Biya may come to be judged by his early promises to make the economy more efficient and to curb more blatant forms of corruption. Although Biya has pursued a cautious economic policy thus far, he could be tempted to seek political support during a power struggle by making economic promises that he is unable to keep.
- We believe Biya will remain suspicious of Libyan intentions in the region, but he could be drawn into regional disputes against his better judgment. A collapse of the Habre government in Chad, for example, probably would force thousands of Chadian exiles to seek shelter in Cameroon which in turn would tax Cameroonian relief capabilities and could sharpen domestic debate about how to deal with a new Chadian

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government. Likewise, we believe if Biya comes to be viewed either as a weak leader or one under siege, outside powers such as Libya and the Soviet Union could be tempted to try to take advantage of the political uncertainty. [REDACTED]

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